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ABSTRACT

Noting that the integration of special needs children into the regular classroom requires changes that differ more in degree than in kind, this paper offers suggestions to language arts teachers for facilitating the mainstreaming of their classes. The first section deals with classroom adjustments and accommodations for children with auditory learning problems, visual learning problems, cognitive problems, emotional problems, and language disorders. The second section discusses the role of the classroom teacher as a member of a multidisciplinary team in the mainstreaming process, specifically in the preparation of individualized educational programs (IEP). (FL)

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LANGUAGE ARTS INSTRUCTION FOR "MAINSTREAMED" PUPILS *
(Presentation for NCTE Conference November 23, 1979)

by

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For decades, children who were labled as having serious learning problems were educated in substantially separate settings in public schools. Special classes were established for children with special needs--classes for the mentally retarded, for the emotionally disturbed, for the physically handicapped, for the learning impaired--apart from regular classrooms in the school. Teachers of such classes were often seen as having something of a beatific aura and the children in these classes had little, if anything, to do with the more "normal" children in schools.

The time for this type of educational segregation has passed. A social consciousness has spurred interest in the educational needs and rights of handicapped children and this, in turn, has resulted in legislation in several states and at the federal level concerning educational programs for children with special needs. In 1975, Public Law 94-142 was passed by Congress. The law mandated, in part, that "to the maximum

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extent appropriate, handicapped children...are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occur only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes...cannot be achieved satisfactorily."

This "mainstreaming" feature is the component of the law that has had the most immediate impact upon--and created the greatest concern among--classroom teachers. There are indeed arguments that can be raised for and against the practice of mainstreaming, but this is not the appropriate forum to engage in such polemic activity. Mainstreaming is a fact and teachers are faced with the realities of providing instruction for children with special needs who are placed in their classrooms.

In discussing language arts instruction for the mainstreamed child, it's important to keep two facts in mind:

1. PL 94-142 provides for mainstreaming of children whose learning problems typically fall into the mild-to-moderate range. Separate special services remain for children whose learning problems are more severe.

2. Mainstreaming does not change an essential fact of teaching: the fact of individual differences in pupils. Teachers have always had children who learn easily and those who don't, children whose handwriting is beautiful

and those whose handwriting is barely legible, children who read above grade level and those who read below. While the educational needs of the mainstreamed child may be more severe in some areas, the nature of the teaching task remains essentially the same. Mainstreaming requires changes that differ more in degree than in kind.

Classroom Adjustments and Accommodations

Very often, some relatively simple adjustments and accommodations will greatly facilitate learning for the special needs child "mainstreamed" into the regular classroom for language arts instruction. It is obviously impossible to anticipate every problem and every accommodation that might be needed in light of each problem. We can only suggest some sample modifications in the classroom learning environment that may provide the child with maximum opportunities for success.

Problems in Auditory Learning. Children with a hearing loss are at an obvious disadvantage in understanding and using spoken language in the classroom. Placing such children near the source of instruction--i.e. seating the child near the speaker and in full view of the speaker's face--is a simple accommodation that can be important. The teacher's adjustment of his/her speech pattern can be important too, since the teacher is most often the source of the greatest amount of communication in the classroom. "Adjustment" does not mean "amplification," since for

children with hearing aids, shouting may blast the child out of his/her seat. When hearing problems are so severe that hearing aids are necessary, teachers should be aware that batteries run down and cords become detached, so that teachers can help by making sure that hearing aids are fully operational before lessons are begun. Learning new vocabulary is often difficult for the child with a hearing loss, and the child may need the visual reinforcement of seeing the word written as well as hearing it said. Because the hearing-impaired child may only hear part of a word, spelling tests are often more fairly administered individually or on a tape recorder, with the words dictated within the context of a sentence. Some children with hearing loss prefer to be as inconspicuous as possible in order to avoid calling attention to the problems they have. The teacher's sensitivity to these feelings will influence the degree to which these children are encouraged to participate in classroom oral language (and social) activities. The amount of accommodation required by any child with a hearing loss depends on the degree of the loss and the child's ability to use other systems to compensate.

Problems for children with auditory perceptual problems--difficulties in auditory discrimination, figure ground, sequencing or memory--are often more subtile. These are the children who are often accused of being "poor listeners" or of "not paying attention." For these children, directions should be clear and concise, and the teacher needs to be sure

that directions are thoroughly understood before the child is left to work independently. The child's independent work area should be as quiet as possible and visual aids should be provided to reinforce auditory learning. Very often, these children need a "buddy," a classmate who can assist with directions, assignments, and other classroom tasks that require retention of spoken language. For these children, fatigue in classroom assignments may be a particular problem.

Problems with Visual Learning

Since it is often not unusual for low vision or partially sighted children to be educated in the regular classroom, attention must be given to providing optimum conditions for learning. Once the child has learned the location of his/her desk, the pencil sharpener, crayons, and other learning tools, he/she needs to be able to count on their being there. Illumination without glare is another important consideration. Although the use of vision will not necessarily further hurt the eye, fatigue in reading and writing assignments may be a factor, and the teacher may need to make time adjustments in assignments. The nature of printed materials themselves can often influence a child's degree of success. While many children with vision problems can handle regular texts and worksheets, others may require large-print material. Special care is needed in preparing ditto masters. The low vision child should be given the first (or darkest) copy of a ditto sheet and it may also be necessary for the teacher to write over the print on the

sheet with a black marking pen. Felt tip pens may be preferred for writing assignments, since pencil lead on paper may be too light for the child to see. For some children, low vision aids may also be necessary, but these are usually provided by the specialist rather than by the classroom teacher.

Children might see well but have problems in aspects of visual perception: discrimination, memory, sequencing, figure ground, or orientation. Simple classroom accommodations--allowing these children to use a marker to follow printed material, color coding the left and right sides of their desk to help with orientation, using writing paper with dark lines, providing auditory clues to reinforce visual patterns or to facilitate recall of visual sequencing (in spelling, for example), and color coding to highlight visual features of print--will facilitate classroom learning for these children.

Children with visual-motor integration problems will have particular problems with handwriting. These children can be provided with desk-top models of what is to be copied during handwriting practice, since looking from the chalkboard to the paper may be especially difficult. Early instruction in cursive writing has also been suggested.

Language Disorders

While remediation of children's language problems are usually attended to by speech and language therapists, adaptations of the language arts curriculum and the learning environ-

ment of the classroom are important to the success of children with language disorders.

For those children with problems in receptive language--i.e. problems in understanding the spoken word--many of the accommodations that are made for children with auditory problems are appropriate. Questions should be short and simple because elaborate interrogation often leaves the child in a quandry as to what is expected. Segmenting directions into specific steps allows the child enough time to process what is being said without having to hold too much information in his/her head at one time. Teachers should be wary about walking around the room while giving directions, since the distraction of having to turn to follow and the loss of direct auditory input can reduce the effectiveness of communication. Once again, simple adjustments like seating the child close to the source of instruction and allowing him/her to have a "buddy" to help him/her remember directions and assignments can ease the learning process for the child. The pre-teaching of all vocabulary is essential for these children.

Language production is also a problem for some children. Very often, the work load must be adjusted to a level that the child can reasonably handle. Children with expressive language problems need plenty of time to respond to questions. Teachers should resist the temptation to interrupt or "hurry up" the child since such comments often interrupt communication and

reinforce the child's feelings of adequacy as a speaker. Children with expressive problems often need encouragement; for example, "Do you mean...?" or "Does the word start with a b?" in structuring responses. If the child loses the train of thought, the teacher can help him/her get back on the track with careful questioning.

Cognitive Problems

Of all the learning problems commonly encountered in schools, the one most familiar to the classroom teacher is the slow learner. Curricular and instructional accommodations for these children--no matter how severe the deficit--need to be tied to the learning capacity, the learning level, and the learning rate of the child. These adjustments involve selecting materials appropriate to the child's instructional level, providing a sound background to support language arts concepts that the child is expected to master, providing for drill and "overlearning" as a way of mastering fundamentals, and moving in small steps to insure a backlog of successful experiences. The vernacular term we use to describe these children--i.e. "slow learners"--indicates that they learn more slowly. To the extent possible, then, instruction should be paced accordingly.

Emotional Problems

The term "emotionally disturbed" is an overused expression in schools. No learning experience is ever devoid of emotion and with many children, emotional problems are merely an "overlay"

on learning problems. Therefore, it is important for teachers to determine whether all learning systems are functional before coming to the conclusion that the problem is purely or primarily emotional. The relationship between a child's school experience and his/her attitudes or emotional reactions toward learning can be described as a "chicken-and-egg" situation. How a child sees him/herself will directly affect his/her learning and, at the same time, success (or lack of success) at learning tasks will shape how the child sees him/herself.

Because positive attitudes are important bases for learning, perhaps the first and most important step for the teacher is to provide language arts experiences in which the child can meet success. Other classroom techniques that have been suggested for children with emotionally-related problems include learning contracts, techniques based on principles of behavior modification, and role playing (which lends itself beautifully to many parts of language arts instruction). While no one claims that these types of adjustments are easy, they have been found useful in helping the emotionally troubled child in the classroom feel good about him/herself, feel good about others, and feel good about learning.

The Teacher on the Team

The mainstreaming of special needs students is certainly not the only provision of Public Law 94-142. The law also provides for a full multidisciplinary diagnosis of the child and

requires an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) for each child. This IEP contains learning goals, instructional objectives, procedures to be followed, evaluation devices, and a schedule of implementation. The classroom teacher's involvement in these diagnostic and prescriptive activities is vital. The whole intent of the thinking behind 94-142 is to allow the handicapped population to function as fully as possible in society. The ultimate "payoff" for all of the special services provided for special needs children in schools is how well these children can function in the larger environment of the classroom.

For a long time, school services for special needs children were provided by special services personnel, without any involvement of classroom teachers. The concept of mainstreaming now makes the absence of the classroom teacher conspicuous. Each classroom teacher must now come to grips with the issue of collaboration and develop his/her own personal perspectives as a member of an interdisciplinary team. Not only do teachers need to become aware of programs and services that the child is receiving outside the classroom, but they also need to become more aware of the contributions that their own observations can make to the team that serves the special needs child. Only through an open line of two-way communication can the teacher offer insight and suggestions to the specialists and, at the same time, gain a greater understanding of the child and how the services provided by the specialists can be reinforced and extended in the classroom. A case can be made, in fact, for

making the classroom the "center stage person" in the multi-disciplinary team.

The classroom teacher's role in formulating and implementing IEP's is no less important. Mainstreaming makes regular class placement an important part of the child's total educational program. For all the expertise that the specialist has to offer, the classroom teacher is often the one with the experience and skill to recognize what the child's most important educational needs are. The teacher's input into plans contained in an IEP can help make recommendations realistic, can help set priorities, can help determine the "manageability" of any program, and can help determine which aspects of the program can best be handled in the classroom and which aspects are best handled outside the classroom. Until now, classroom teacher involvement in IEP's has not been as great as it might be. The time to change from minimum to maximum input has arrived.

Mainstreaming has indeed created new roles and new responsibilities for classroom teachers, and meeting these new roles and responsibilities has become a challenge. But it is this type of challenge that makes education an exciting profession and makes teaching a fine art and a precise science.